

**Knowledge profit and knowledge loss in an Enlightened House: the library collection of the Hammonds of St Alban's Court, Kent**

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## Introduction: The Country House Library as a changing concept in the C16<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup>

*'The more significant the books and the more quickly the shelves had been filled by an enthusiastic nineteenth-century collector, the more likely it was that they would eventually be removed and sold.'*<sup>ii</sup>

Mark Purcell, *The Country House Library*



Fig 1: Isaac Cruikshank's satirical print on the reading habits of the C18th and C19th

Our books, as so much more than physical manifestations of our reading tastes, provide an accurate but sometimes distorted mirror to reflect our lives: they are a projection of both what we are and what we would like- or feel we ought - to be. Although the scale, in every sense, may be different, the same concept applies to the country house library.

From the very beginning of printing in the mid fifteenth century, book production entered a glacially slow but similarly unstoppable decline in terms of material quality to arrive at the modern paperback. This ubiquitous, familiar and in some ways iconic object is the vehicle for modern texts of all genres and intellectual weights, the ultimate end point for the democratisation of access to the written word. Today we see a further erosion of the physical and material text in digital library content: a further leap forward for the democratisation of access to knowledge but a severe blow for tactile culture.

It is easy to link the explosion of printing and accelerated production of reading matter with a corresponding increase in literacy<sup>iii</sup>. This was not across the social board but, before the age of public lending libraries accessible to all, was confined to a fortunate minority well into the C19th. This combination of restricted access, both physically and intellectually, gave books and book ownership a premium status in between the C17th and C19th, with the country house library at its purest and most visible heart.



Fig 2. Hall's Library Margate, an early lending library

The development of such a visible literary and intellectual foundation to a family in the form of a specifically accommodated domestic library could be seen as a means of power and influence. It was a form of trickle down of intellectual capital, with the C17th and C18th Enlightenment values of reason, the order of nature and individual knowledge - influencing society from the top down. As book production methods cheapened the active collection of books of quality and rarity as a means of showing status found its apotheosis in a late C18th/early C19th movement which was coined bibliomania<sup>v</sup> in 1809. This desire to collect certain categories of book material sets out a stall for a very outward and profile-driven display of status to peers and wider society alike: not only were the bibliomaniacs able to understand a wide and eclectic range of subject matter, they also had the leisure and the disposable wealth to commit to such collection.

The movement seems to have been very personality based: the collections amassed by notable bibliomaniacs such as John Ker, 3rd Duke of Roxburghe (1740 – 1804), George Spencer, 2nd Earl Spencer (1758 – 1834) and William Cavendish, 6th Duke of Devonshire (1790 – 1858) did not necessarily survive intact once an individual's passion for books and book collecting was spent. In this, the movement was also somewhat cannibalistic. The famous sale of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Duke of Roxburghe's expansive collection of over 10,000 items by the 4<sup>th</sup> Duke in 1812 increased the library holdings of Spencer at Althorp and Cavendish at Chatsworth considerably and notably in terms of the individual high profile catalogue items that were carved up between the pair at that time<sup>vi</sup> – as well as increasing the burden of debt on their estates. In keeping with this constant reflection of wider social trends through the mirror of book collecting and library stewardship, the ultimate conclusion of the story of the library at Althorp demonstrates what was happening in the world beyond the doors to the country house library. It is somewhat ironic that a significant proportion of the Althorp library was bought by philanthropist Enriqueta Augustina Rylands (1843 – 1908) in 1892 in memory of her industrialist husband John Rylands, as a foundation collection for the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester. The C19th social and economic control shift from country to town and from land to industry and the bringing of the tools of knowledge and therefore power into the public domain can be seen in this remarkable act of generosity and inclusivity.

It is clear, therefore, that on a micro-level, country house libraries and their changing status within a family were an accurate barometer of changing fortunes and priorities: as the quote at the start of the chapter so adroitly points out, they were often one of the first pieces of metaphorical family silver to be disposed of as the economy and society of Britain changed through the relative instability of the early C20th. From the evidence provided by an available inventory of the library collection, St Albans Court, in the small village of Nonington in Kent, contained one such country house library, and its changing physical contents and status provide a sound exemplar of type.

St Alban's Court was the home of the Hammond Family between the early C16th and 1938 when the house and its contents were sold by the last residing Hammond family member. In this time, the house went through at least four physical incarnations, with major improvements in 1556, 1665 and 1790 before a complete rebuild in 1876<sup>vii</sup>. Typical of the dearth of direct archive evidence for book ownership<sup>viii</sup>, the wills of Hammond family members give tantalising clues and hints at potential evidence for reading and books possibly to have been present from the earliest days of St Alban's Court. This evidence poses a series of intriguing lines of questioning. The 1556 will of the second family incumbent of St Alban's Court, Thomas Hammond, states that his wife, Alice [Alyse], shall have

**Commented [EA1]:** Check with PH: he says 1936, the inventory says the library (and the house?) were sold in 1938. Maybe the house earlier and the library later? If so, where did the books go 1936 – 38?

‘during suche tymes as she remayneth [a] Wydow...the lyttle Chamber within the Chamber over the sayd Parler under the Garret there and the Closet.’<sup>ix</sup>

The concept of a closet has changed over time. Danielle Bobker, in her paper *The Literature and Culture of the Closet in the Eighteenth Century*, sets out the C16th meaning of the closet very well:

‘In the houses of people of quality and, increasingly, those of the middling sort, private rooms served as prayer closets, cabinets of curiosity,...libraries, art galleries’<sup>x</sup>

Susie West<sup>xi</sup> goes further and links the concept of the early modern library as being a private, almost hidden room within another private room, often accessible via the owner’s bedchamber – the ‘lyttle chamber within the chamber’ of the will? Could it be that the Hammonds had already started to accumulate some of the most significant aspects of their collection even at such an early date? There are earlier inventories, including a 1612 inventory<sup>xii</sup>, but as is common with this type of archival record it does not provide any direct evidence of book ownership. As Susie West states

‘Even then, rooms full of books could often be omitted from the main inventory or, where only partial inventories survive, taken for a widow’s reserved goods but not for the entire contents.’<sup>xiii</sup>

However, as a family on the fringes of court, they seem to have been keen to display an air of culture from an early time, with a series of portraits commissioned by Cornelius Jansen [Johnson] (1593 – 1661)<sup>xiv</sup>, a painter of choice for the emerging and aspirational English gentry in the C17th<sup>xv</sup>. For a family who were ambitious and keen to show intellectual and social legitimacy, would a book collection not have been a prerequisite?

In 1716, there is another tantalising clue to the possible use of rooms in St Albans Court as places to house library collections. A lease of that year lists that there was a

‘long study and the room going through to it.’<sup>xvi</sup>

The long gallery of so many properties was used – often retrofitted - as a library space: extant examples include the magnificent library at Blickling Hall, Norfolk, the Hurd Library at Hartlebury, Worcestershire and Eastnor Castle, Herefordshire. Could it be that the ‘long study’ at St Albans Court was such as space? As Susie West neatly points out in her exploration of the changing fortunes of country house libraries between 1660 and 1720

‘The result of the last three centuries of the loss and destruction of private library environments means that our sense of the seventeenth-century space for books is lacking in visual evidence.’<sup>xvii</sup>

The rebuilt 1876 house was designed by renowned country house architect George Devey. Ever in touch with the zeitgeist, the significance of this choice by the Hammond family may go beyond Devey’s being a leading society architect of his day. Devey was one of the architects commissioned by another, more famous banking family, the de Rothschilds, and he also had a connection with work on the Althorp estate for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl Spencer. It is possible to see this as a sign of the social aspiration of the Hammonds, where connections and physical associations with the trappings of the right society were key to social acceptance and mobility? It may also be an indication of a more direct link to book collecting, both of which were interests of successive de Rothschilds and as has been shown, the 2<sup>nd</sup>

Earl Spencer. It would be interesting to determine if there was a connection through personal interests or whether this was just coincidence.

It is clear from an available floorplan of the 1876 St Albans Court that Devey had been instructed to make the library a focus, being one of only four ground floor public-facing spaces in the house. It occupies one of the most prominent positions in the building, facing south west for good light and looking out over the formal gardens of the Court.



Fig.3 Floor plan of the ground floor of St Alban's Court, 1907

The prominence of this space shows the importance placed by the then head of the family, William Oxenden Hammond (1817 – 1903), on the library collection, and by association also shows that, in terms of size, it was sufficiently numerous to in 1876 to require such a spacious room.

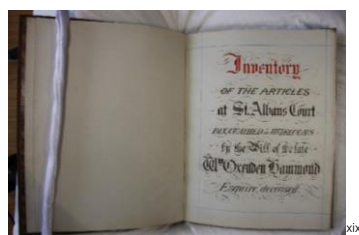


Fig 4. The title page of the 1903 inventory

Some of the answers to these questions and suppositions lie in the *Inventory of the Articles at St Alban's Court*. This comprehensive assessment and quantification of the library and chattel collections was drawn up on the death of William Oxenden Hammond in 1903 and forms a snapshot in time of all the portable property accumulated by successive members of the family. Neatly scribed and tidily bound, the inventory is divided into plate, jewellery, statues, objects of vertu [sic.], pictures, miniatures, prints and books. It also shows the distribution of the collection across the house, not just confining the book collection to the library but providing additional locations through later pencil annotations, again possibly indicating the importance of books and reading to the daily lives of the family.

The inventory forms the primary source upon which this research project is based, providing an overview on the content of a country house library and a catalogue of at least 200 years of book collecting, prior to dispersal. Like the Spencer and Roxburghe heirs before them, William Oxenden Hammond's successors seem to have viewed the library not purely as a source of recreation and

enjoyment but as a liability that they could no longer afford, or at the very least an asset to be liquidised.

It is to the story of the collectors of this intellectual asset that we now turn.

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<sup>i</sup> The Country House Library; Purcell, Mark; Yale University Press, New Haven and London; 2017; p10

<sup>ii</sup> Isaac Cruikshank, 1756–1810, British; The Lending Library, between 1800 and 1811; watercolour, black ink and brown ink on medium, lightly textured, beige wove paper; B1975.4.867; Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

<sup>iii</sup> The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe; Eisenstein, Elizabeth; Cambridge University Press, 2005

<sup>iv</sup> Hall's Library Margate, engraved print/aquatint on paper; The Trustees of the British Library

<sup>v</sup> Bibliomania: Book Collecting, Cultural Politics, and the Rise of Literary Heritage in Romantic Britain; Connell, Philip; Representations, Summer, 2000, No. 71 pp24-47; University of California Press; <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2902924>

<sup>vi</sup> The Althorp Library of the second Earl Spencer, now in the John Rylands Library of Manchester: its formation and growth; Lister, Antony; Bulletin of the John Rylands Library. 1989;71(2):67-86; John Rylands University Library, Manchester

<sup>vii</sup> Old St Albans Court, Nonington; Hobbs, Peter; Archaeologia Cantiana 125:273-290; 2005 pp. 278 - 9

<sup>viii</sup> An Architectural Typology for the Early Modern Country House Library, 1660–172; West, Susie; The Library: The Transactions of the Bibliographical Society, Volume 14, Number 4, December 2013, pp. 441-464

<sup>ix</sup> *ibid.*, p.278

<sup>x</sup> The Literature and Culture of the Closet in the Eighteenth Century; Danielle Bobker; Digital Defoe: Studies in Defoe & His Contemporaries 6, no.1; fall2014; University of Illinois; p.70

<sup>xi</sup> *Op.cit.*, West, Susie; 2013

<sup>xii</sup> Handwritten note in 1903 Inventory, p1

<sup>xiii</sup> *Op.cit.*, West, Susie; 2013

<sup>xiv</sup> Hobbs, 2005, *op.cit.*

<sup>xv</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornelius\\_Johnson\\_\(artist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornelius_Johnson_(artist)); accessed 1 May 2021

<sup>xvi</sup> Confirm ref with Peter

<sup>xvii</sup> *Op.cit.*, West, Susie; 2013

<sup>xviii</sup> Ground plan of St. Albans Court, Kent; Architectural Review, Vol. 21, 1907, p. 298

<sup>xix</sup> Title page of the 1903 inventory, imaged by Peter Hobbs